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ABSTRACT

Scholars and educators concerned with the work of Michel Foucault should approach James Miller's biography "The Passion of Michel Foucault" with a fair degree of skepticism because the author's motives for writing the book call into question his findings. According to Miller's own preface, he enters his project with his agenda already spelled out. He intends to read Foucault's life work, which covers the history of ideas, knowledge, and institutions, as if his oeuvre comprised one enormous "roman a clef," and contained the confession and self-revelation that Foucault so assiduously avoided during his life. Miller weaves the fragments of Foucault's texts into a biographical narrative of such seamlessness that readers may be unaware of what is happening and how their views are being manipulated. In many ways, Miller has followed a strategy he ascribes to Foucault--he has obscured or camouflaged his controversial agenda by bulwarking it in brilliantly thorough traditional scholarship. His approach is traditional in that he believes there is a causal link between a person's life and writing. He holds that the formative events of Foucault's childhood and adolescence in post-WWII Poitiers, France, shaped his personality and world view in a way that corresponds with psychoanalytic paradigms. Unfortunately, this may lead Miller to look for precipitating causes where none exist. (TB)

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THE RHETORIC OF REVELATION: THE CASE OF BIOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF MICHEL FOUCAULT

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Although it is a scrupulously footnoted and brilliantly researched work, many readers will find that James Miller's motives for writing The Passion of Michel Foucault (Simon and Schuster, 1993) problematize the work and call into question its findings. In his preface, Miller asserts that "this book is not a biography ... it is, rather, a narrative account of one man's lifelong struggle to honor Nietzsche's gnomic injunction, 'to become what one is.'" Thus, Miller enters into his project with an agenda already spelled out. He intends to read Foucault's life work, which covers the history of ideas, knowledge, and institutions, as if his oeuvre comprised one enormous roman a clef, and contained the confession and self-revelation that Foucault so assiduously avoided during his life.

That the roman à clef paradigm influenced Miller early in the writing of this book is evidenced in an article he wrote for the Fall 1990-Winter 1991 25th anniversary issue of Salmagundi. Entitled "Foucault: The Secrets of a Man" Miller's essay exposes details of Foucault's last moments as he died of AIDS. Further, it focuses on Foucault's alleged self-destructive impulses and sado-masochism and probes his relationship with his lover, Herve

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Guibert, whose novel To The Friend Who Didn't Save My Life (A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauve la vie), published in Paris in 1990, was widely held to be a particularly egregious form of roman a clef, which "violated not merely the trust of his dead friend but the unwritten code, still strong in France, that one simply does not talk in public about a person's private life" (Salmagundi 88-89, 324).

Although such exposure may have been ethically problematic, in Miller's view unbaring potentially scandalous information was necessary in order to better understand his philosophical writings. Foucault's first biographer, Didier Eribon, whose book, Michel Foucault, was published in 1991, felt no such urge. In fact, Eribon's approach is to allow the details of Foucault's life speak for themselves, without a large amount of biographical interpretation or judgment. However, the primary difference between Eribon and Miller is that Eribon does not consider that Foucault was writing a veiled confession when he wrote his philosophical works.

Miller sees things quite differently. In an article that appears in a later issue of Salmagundi, Miller reiterated his position that Foucault's life work constituted encrypted autobiography: "In reading Foucault's work, I was constantly trying to locate those 'fragments of autobiography' that Foucault himself at the end of his life said that he had communicated in his text. And in writing my book, I occasionally took what I believed to be such fragments, and deliberately used them, torn out of their original context, in order to evoke the color and

mood of Foucault's own imaginative universe" (Salmagundi 97, 96-97). Any person who believes that biography should be a factual, historical document will agree that Miller's techniques are questionable at best. While Miller's use of Foucault's fragments, "torn out of their original context" may in fact illuminate and clarify Foucault's life vis-a-vis his work, any fragments used in such a way will necessarily also distort and misrepresent. In the case of Miller's book, the fragments of Foucault's texts are woven into the biographical narrative in such a seamless manner that a reader may be largely unaware of what is happening and how her views are being manipulated. True, Miller provides careful notes which appear at the end of the book, and it is possible to sit down and trace the origin of the fragments, but it is not an easy task, and most readers probably won't bother.

By recreating dialogue and interjecting Foucault's words, Miller pushes the line between biography and fiction, thereby foregrounding the question of what it means to represent a person's life. Miller also reminds us, in a particularly flamboyant manner, that writing biography is largely an act of interpretation. Composing a biography is also an attempt to impose order upon disorder, and any resulting arrangement of data must necessarily follow the biographer's own biases and belief systems. In his quest to "evoke the color and mood of Foucault's imaginative universe," Miller follows a method that has come to characterize many recent biographies, especially those of living subjects; that is, he intends to expose or reveal, and thus the

structure of his arguments and the presentation of facts are shaped by the rhetoric of revelation.

Ironically, in many ways, Miller has followed a strategy he ascribes to Foucault -- he has obscured or camouflaged his controversial agenda by bulwarking it in brilliantly thorough traditional scholarship. What is traditional about Miller's work is its greatest asset; he neatly summarizes the divergent influences of other writers, and he provides an excellent overview of the philosophical, political, and cultural environment that surrounded Foucault. Nevertheless, Miller's revelations about Foucault's life-long search for "limit-experiences," which translates into an obsession with death and self-destruction, along with an alleged enthusiasm for consensual sado-masochism cast a pall over the entire biography, and it essentially scandalizes and therefore calls into question the validity of Foucault's life work.

The fact that Miller emphasises the sexual "limit-experiences" of Foucault while ignoring the more mundane details of his life constitutes a rather serious bias has not gone unnoticed. In fact, the Winter 1993 issue of Salmagundi contains a rather extensive debate on Miller's Passion, and David M. Halperin's pungent observation that "My quarrel with Miller's book, in short, is not that its author is uncomprehending of Foucault's project. It is that he is politically opposed to it" (Salmagundi 97, 71).

And yet, Miller's desire to uncover connections between the personal and the public may be justified, given the nature of

Foucault's popularity and his influence on the fields of philosophy, history, and literature. As Alistair Macintyre puts it, "important questions arise for us about the relationship of the author's life to the author's work to which conceivably Foucault's own life might provide answers. The Foucault who once told us that the time was past when we would inquire about authors also taught us to reopen the question of the relations between authors and discourses" (Salmagundi 97, 54).

Miller's approach to biography is traditional in the manner in which he believes that there is a causal link between one's life and one's writing. Thus, Miller holds that the formative events of Foucault's childhood and adolescence in post-WWII Poitiers, France, shaped his personality and worldview in a way that corresponds with psychoanalytic paradigms. Unfortunately, this belief may lead Miller to search for precipitating causes when none exist, to the point of recounting an questionable speculation that Foucault had inappropriate feelings for his sister. Further, the need to find precipitating childhood trauma may reduce Miller at times to banality by suggesting that it was simply due to his strained relationship with his physician father that Foucault engaged in self-laceration, mutilation, and suicide attempts.

But, considering that he relies on revelation and exposure to make his points, Miller has no choice but to posit causal relationships. In order to persuade a reader (who is most likely accustomed to tabloid-style journalism and biography), Miller must endorse the worldview that appearences deceive and that

reality lies somewhere beneath the surface, ready for a careful critic or biographer to unravel. The act itself of uncovering, or unveiling, implies a revelation and it also suggests that what is about to unfold is a kind of "truth" discourse. The rediscovery of truth is all the more valuable in a post-Foucauldian world where "truth" has been posited as a socially determined construct. Ironically, Foucault's diminution of "truth" did not have the desired effect. Instead of liberating readers from the confines of absolutism or metaphysics, the absence of "truth" discourse has merely made it all the more prized. If one can suggest that truth does in fact still survive in the midst of materialist discourse, then one can be presumed to have uncovered something of great value. Hence, the revelations and exposures reinforce an impression that Miller has found a way to reinstate or recover "truth." He has done this by reinserting the subject (the self) back into Foucault's life work, by claiming that the self was there all along in the form of encrypted autobiography hidden between the lines of Madness and Civilization, The Order of Things, "What is an Author?," Discipline and Punish, The Archeology of Knowledge, The History of Sexuality, and all Foucault's other works.

However, there are flaws in Miller's reasoning. For one, he relies too heavily on a psychoanalytic paradigm to posit the presence of a submerged level, an unchanging and consistently perverse "underground man" who lurks within each of Foucault's works. Further, the necessity to reveal and expose requires one to endorse the psychoanalytic paradigm to the point that it

becomes imperative to speculate about what might have happened in Foucault's early life. For some writers, this sort of speculation is the mark of good biography. However, in a work that desires to find a connecting thread that links all of Foucault's work and to explain his philosophical notions by relating them to his personal life, it is not necessary to deploy a vocabulary of anxiety, depression, mania, ad infinitum.

Instead of processing the events of Foucault's life through an a priori mechanism of psychoanalysis, it is possible to interpret Foucault's interest in "limit-experiences" in a different manner. For example, one can look closely at Foucault's experiences with sado-masochism as a strategy for ordering one's personal reality. Instead of focusing on Discipline and Punish as a Rosetta stone, Miller could have looked at The Order of Things to posit why Foucault's "limit-experiences" required a destructive relationship between bodily perception and mental cognition. By doing so, Miller might have pointed out that Foucault's project revolves around a Wittgensteinian the-limits-of-language-are-the-limits-of-my-world linguistic stance which suggests that in order to develop new knowledge, it is necessary to find a way to break apart or transcend linguistic structures. We are prisoners of our discourse, and our perspectives cannot position themselves beyond a simple dialectic between what is and what isn't, observes Foucault. For example, an underlying belief in the principle of continuity causes one to perceive the forms of nature in the same way as 18th-century French naturalist Bonnet; nature creates a

uniform, evolving progression from lower to higher, simple to complex. That Foucault's project has been incorrectly attributed to structuralism has been pointed out by Mark Lilla in his review of Miller's book (Times Literary Supplement, March 26, 1993). It is possible that Foucault's "limit-experiences" of consensual sado-masochism represent an urgent need to find a new heuristic, a method of discovering new kinds of knowledge -- knowledge which does not have at its base a kind of cold intellection of either/or.

Miller astutely observes that there are gains to be made by analyzing inversion, and by delving into the realm of either/or and oppositions. Miller's work makes an enormous contribution to the general understanding of the goals of philosophical inquiry after WWII. It is extremely helpful that Miller situates Foucault within a tradition of philosophers and writers who, as Miller puts it, explored the human potential of Nietzsche's will to power by positing its opposite, a "will to nothingness." This concept, which Miller suggests is a synthesis of Freud and Nietzsche, was articulated by Gilles Deleuze. Its purpose is heuristic: "the will to nothingness might be transformed into its opposite -- an energetic (re)affirmation of the will to power in its (uncivilized) vital essence" (Passion, 197). On the surface, this position seems to hold out the promise of a new sort of chaos theory for philosophy, one which would allow new models or paradigms of consciousness and knowledge-acquisition to emerge. Unfortunately, in Foucault, if the will to nothingness took the form of consensual sado-masochism, a kind of

mortification of the flesh only engendered or perpetuated duality, which Miller refers to as a daimonic Other. If there is a way to transcend the limits of language by reintroducing the nonverbal sensations of flesh, without reverting to empiricism or medieval mysticism, then it is possible that Foucault's "limit-experiences" were "limit-experiments" in the laboratory of a nuclear-age Europe, where, in the wake of terrorism, AIDS, and "Dr. Strangelove" self-annihilation scenarios, consciousness was becoming progressively more shaped by apocalyptic notions. It may very well turn out that Foucault was the first of a long line of millenialist philosophers who died in their quest to find a way to order chaos at the end of time.

Foucault's importance as a towering figure of twentieth-century thought and his ideas about writing in particular, mean that he needs to be studied in all the disciplines that he influenced--philosophy, literature, and history.